

Answer

Iran fiasco rekindles debate on US military readiness

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What is the real state of readiness of the US armed forces? Could lack of readiness have aborted the April 24 hostage rescue mission in Iran?

President Carter has insisted there is "no connection" between the admitted problems the services have with spare parts and lack of trained people, and the technical failures that caused him to terminate the mission. But the question persists.

Most senior commanders in the US armed services acknowledge that the loss of trained personnel to better-paying civilian jobs, rising fuel costs, and sometimes insufficient or inadequate spare parts have affected overall readiness for combat.

Refusing to apply the general principle to the particular case of the helicopter breakdowns that caused abortion of the Iran mission, President Carter told his April 30 news conference that there was no linkage, "because we focused the enormous resources of our nation and its elaborate military capability on this particular equipment used in this operation."

"Had there been some shortage," the President insisted, "of either technicians, or spare parts, or their maintenance capability, it would not have been permitted in this particular case of the helicopters, the C-130s, or the equipment the men took in for the rescue operation. So there is no connection between those at all."

Just the same, many people at all levels of the armed forces and Defense Department are asking questions:

- If — as the President, Defense Secretary Harold Brown, and Gen. David C. Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, insist — six serviceable RH-53D helicopters were the minimum needed (only five remained when the mission was terminated), why not have provided 12, or 15, or even 20 helicopters?

- Why did maintenance crews aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz, apparently not informed of the special stress the choppers would suffer on their long flight, not install standard sandscreens on the engines to protect them from the sandstorms that downed at least one of the big "Sea Stallions?"

- Were there any disagreements along the chain of command — between Col. Charles A. Beckwith, the site commander in Iran; Maj. Gen. James G. Vaught, the overall operation commander (both of them Army officers); the Joint Chiefs in Washington; or others in authority elsewhere?

- Did the Soviets, as claimed by some congressional sources, warn the US to call off the mission, and was that a factor in ending it?

The answers, given by Secretary Brown and General Jones in a strong backup to the President's remarks defending the decisions to plan, execute, and end the mission, were a flat "no" to the last two questions.

On the related issues of maintenance and the sand screens, they avoided direct answers. Defense Department spokesman Thomas Ross later confirmed to some reporters that the screens had been omitted, largely in the interest of more engine power. Other officials affirmed this had not been responsible for the downing of the sand-struck chopper; its gyro artificial horizon, but not its engine, had failed.

US special forces agents who infiltrated Iran to prepare and assist in the later phases of the actual rescue in Tehran reportedly have all been "exfiltrated" safely from Iran.

An alleged report by the Central Intelligence Agency estimating 60 percent of the hostages would be killed under the rescue plan does not exist, "according to my knowledge," said Secretary Brown.

Still unanswered were much larger questions about the readiness of the more than 2 million men and women and the equipment of the US armed forces stationed around the world, of which the raiding force represented a tiny, ultra-trained elite.